

Healing and controversy: Exposition of John 4:43-5:18

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John 4:43-54 Jesus heals the Nobleman's son

v43 Jesus had stayed two days with the Samaritans (v40), not something a Jew would normally do from choice, but the impact of the testimony of the woman of Samaria had made it necessary. In Samaria, his status as a prophet, maybe even as the Messiah (v29), had been recognised by the woman, and many more had believed after hearing Jesus' message for themselves, and they acknowledged that He was Saviour of the world (v42). Note they recognised that Jesus was more than just the Saviour of the Jews.

v44 Against this background therefore, the otherwise apparently unconnected v44 can be readily understood. Jesus had no expectation that he would be received in the same way in Galilee, his home country. This is expanded upon elsewhere: Mark 6:1-6; Matthew 13:54-57. These show how his abilities were simply regarded as odd, and so not properly assessed. Their attitude was, "well we know him, don't we?" The result is that Jesus cannot work among them, because of unbelief. Indeed, at Nazareth they would have stoned Him (Luke 4:14-30).

v45 These Galileans had seen what Jesus had done at Jerusalem (John 2:13-25): he had cleansed the temple, and done miracles there (John 2:23). They therefore did receive Him, for they were keen to see miracles and signs, but, as we have seen, they weren't keen on receiving his teaching.

Application points

How well do I receive those who come in the name of the Lord?

Do I receive them at all?

If I do receive them, do I, like the Galileans did Jesus, put them in a special position, so I can avoid the uncomfortable aspects of their teaching?

We think we know the people who are close to us. We therefore don't really listen to them.

If they do something that suggests they might be special, then do I demand to see for myself some special proof of it?

Such an attitude is one of disbelief: we think, "how can someone we know so well be any different from us?" By such means we avoid listening to what they say.

v46-47 Jesus returns to Cana in Galilee. Probably many people were hoping for some sort of repeat of the "water into wine" miracle. Yes, this would really put Cana on the map, maybe we'll get a lot of pilgrims, and, like Lourdes, we'll be in business...

A "Nobleman" or Courtier, (i.e. a man of significance and prominence in the royal household) asks Jesus to come and heal his son, who is said to be on the point of death. How should Jesus respond? Is this request genuine, or is he purely a miracle seeker, perhaps encouraged to come forward by the town council to raise the profile of Cana? (NB v51-52 shows that the father had come more than a day's journey to see Jesus.)

v48 Note that **therefore** Jesus said to him... Why? Because this man has heard Jesus has come from Judea, where he had done miracles. Is he just a miracle seeker?

"Unless you see signs and wonders". These words, signs and wonders, generally appear together in the New Testament. It is easy to miss the fact that the two words are intended to signify something distinct from each other.

Sign: this is something to appeal to the intellect, something done that will distinguish this man from other men. In this case this will be shown by a miraculous act as a token of divine authority and power.

Wonders: the word signifies "something strange", indicating something with a powerful emotional appeal, with a clearly supernatural origin.

Without such things, Jesus declares they will certainly not believe. Remember that the people of the time were looking for a Messiah who would provide for physical needs in this world only, and give the Jews political independence.

v49. The Courtier now becomes more direct in his plea. He starts "Sir": this man of high social standing is now expressing deep humility, and follows with statement full of a directness that clearly comes from the heart, "before my child dies".

v50 Jesus implicitly refuses the request to "come". Coming would have allowed a crowd of miracle hunters to gather, and made a big spectacle, just what Jesus is seeking to avoid. Besides Jesus perceives that the case is manifestly too urgent for days of travel delay. Jesus does not need to be there, he can heal at a distance. "Go, your son is living (present continuous)".

In spite of what must have seemed to him like a put off, the father believes (aorist, signifying a point belief, hence an action of faith)- and goes home.

Application point

Do I still believe God when he gives me a positive answer, but which isn't quite what I expected?

v51. On his way home, his slaves meet him, saying the boy lives. Were they sent out to call the father back from seeking Jesus?

v52 A question of critical importance to the nobleman: "Was the healing the result of Jesus' work or was it chance?". "Yesterday" this shows that the father had travelled a long way. The time was critical "at the seventh hour", as was the sudden recovery: "the fever left him". The aorist tense indicates a point action in the fever leaving: this was not the usual rather slow recovery process with much weakness that normally occurs after a severe illness. Compare the very similar healing of Peter's mother-in law (Matthew 8:14-15).

v53 The healing was at exactly the same time! A miracle. The father and household believe (aorist), bringing a different level of believing, one which is now based on a double witness, the word Jesus had spoken together with the fulfilled action. Both were needed, neither on its own is enough.

Application points

How does my faith change or deepen in response to truly answered specific prayer?

*Have I ever known it really **was** God, or was it always "perhaps God worked but it could have been coincidence, or the work of a medicine (for example)".*

Do I always make sure I know God answered me? Should I keep a book of remembrance?

Only specific prayer, that is highly specifically answered, generates this sort of faith.

v54 This was Jesus's second sign. Why the second, when he had done many others at Jerusalem? What was Jesus's first sign: the water into wine at Cana (John 2:11). What is special then about this sign?

Firstly, these signs were both in Galilee, the place of unbelief, and needed to be special.

Secondly, remember that a sign is something that appeals to the intellect.

"Water into wine" was a sign because normal humans couldn't possibly do it.

This healing was a sign because it was "action at a distance", and sudden, with no possibility of it being a psychosomatic healing. Remember there were other healers among the Jews at that time, just as there are today. They work by touch, and by other immediate interaction with the sick person. This was different.

Application point

A real sign is something that man cannot fake.

What is my own faith resting on?

In addition to the historical Biblical testimony, I should have some personal experience of God working for me that is beyond dispute. Have I got such a testimony?

John 5:1-18 Jesus heals the man at the pool of Bethesda

John 5:1 Jesus returns to Jerusalem for another feast of the Jews. Clearly Jesus sees this place as the proper focus for his ministry.

v2 The pool of Bethesda - "house of kindness", located at the sheep gate - this gate was in the east wall of Jerusalem, at the north east corner of the Temple. This would be the way out from the Temple to Gethsemane. (The precise location is said to be somewhat uncertain however.) This place had five porticoes, so there is a lot of space for the beggars, and it provides them with shelter.

v3 Being next to the temple it was a good place for beggars, as many people would wish to show their generosity there. There was a **multitude** of sick beggars.

The Received text adds v3b and 4, which are left out of the Alexandrian text. This gives a further reason for the sick being there - an angel occasionally goes and troubles the waters, and the first person to get in gets healed. No strong reason to have it in the text, as this can be inferred from what follows. It may have been a later gloss to clarify what was meant.

v5-6 From the multitude, Jesus picks on just one man, who had been there 38 years. Jesus knew he had been there this long - since before Jesus was born. Was he a particularly well known character, or did he make great play of the time he had been there?

There was a multitude of equally needy people, but Jesus only chose **one**. Strangely, we are not told how the other crippled people reacted to the healing.

Application points

We must know which person God wants us to meet the needs of. We cannot deal with everyone. Thinking about there being so many is a common way of ending up doing nothing.

How did the other cripples feel?

What do I think about this unfairness?

We are not told, but how do I think Jesus selected the person to heal?

How should I choose whom to help?

v6 Note the question: "*Do you wish to be whole?*" Isn't his problem and desire obvious? Well no. A sick person, especially one who has been ill a long time, may not really want to be healed. He would have to take a normal part in Society, and he'll have to work! Jesus never assumed what "people in need" wanted. This is not just a matter of respect, though that is itself important. Unless the man desires healing, in his heart, he cannot and will not receive it, even if it is offered. Such questions provide hooks for the exercise for the heart desire that leads to faith.

Jesus also asked other people (they were all blind) the same sort of question, "*what do you want me to do for you?*" (Matthew:22 two blind men; Mark 10:51, Luke 18:41 blind Bartimeus)

Application points

*What do I really want God to do for **me**?*

Do I want to be free of my problems, or do they now define me such that I prefer to keep them?

Am I careful to assess the needs of others, and check their perspective, before I offer a solution?

Do I sensitively maintain the respect and humanity of those I help, whenever I help them either practically or spiritually?

Do I speak and act in a way that induces faith in my hearers?

The unsaved are spiritually blind. Should I ask them what they see their need as being in the same way?

v7 The man does not answer the question directly, but assumes that the means of healing must be what he has always expected it to be, via the troubled waters of the pool. So he looks to a remedy of the deficient means, the lack of someone to put him in the water. This verse shows too that his ailment renders him completely immobile.

Jesus clearly regards this answer as a yes, however defectively expressed.

Application point

What am I expecting to happen when I have a problem that needs solving?

For example, when I am sick, do I expect the solution to come through human medicine, or can God heal me directly?

v8 "Rise, take up your bed and walk". This is a command. Will he obey? This man has been immobile for at least 38 years. Naturally all his muscles and even his bones will have wasted. This action has therefore become naturally speaking utterly impossible, even if it might have been possible shortly after his problems began.

v9 The man was instantly healed, and he obeyed. It was immediate, just as the water had turned to wine, and the nobleman's son had been healed. He picked up his mattress as directed, and walked perfectly. He didn't hobble.

But it was a Sabbath. This is Jesus' first open violation of the Sabbath law.

v10 The Jews (i.e. the Jewish authorities) saw a man carrying his bedroll. They regarded this as work that was illegal on the Sabbath. It would however, according to the Mishnah, have been all right to carry a sick man on the bedroll on the Sabbath. So the man could have been carried, together with the bedroll.

v11 The man simply testifies to what he had been told to do by the man who had healed him.

v12 The Jews ignore the fact that this very well known 38 years sick man has been cured! Religious people can have a hardness of heart and "lose the plot". All that matters to them is finding out who is responsible for the Sabbath breaking: this is an attack on Jesus Himself.

Application point

Do I ever miss what God is saying or doing because I am focussed on my own agenda?

Does my imperfect understanding of God's ways prevent me from seeing and rejoicing in, the blessings God has given to others, simply because I'm too rigid in thinking that God must work according to my precepts?

v13 The man does not know who healed him! It was perhaps all too much of a shock: he had just done what he was told and had no other thoughts. He has no revelation of who Jesus is. Jesus had left the scene, presumably to avoid being clamoured by all the other sick people at the pool, who were all still lying there.

v14 Jesus seeks him and finds him in the Temple [he could not have entered while he was crippled]. Was the man giving thanks for his healing? We are not told. But Jesus knows he needs something more, and gives him a stern admonition. "*Behold you are well, do not continue in sin any more lest a worse thing befall you*". Had his physical illness been a consequence of sin? Perhaps, as it sometimes is, and physical incapacity is the consequence. Healing might then allow a man to continue a dissolute life which sickness has restrained. Or it might be that the man has a spiritual "lameness" which is not directly connected to the physical one.

Application points.

If I am sick, especially if chronically or repeatedly, is it a consequence of my leading a sinful life?

(We should always check for this possibility, rather than simply seek every means of healing, just as a worldling does. For the Christian there are no "second causes", and God seeks to work good out of all circumstances, including sickness (Romans 8:28)).

If I heal someone, do I remember to follow up with the spiritual dimension?

v15 The man then tells the Jewish authorities that it is Jesus that has healed him. What was his motive? Was it simply his ingrained submission to the Jewish authorities? The man gave Jesus no thanks for his healing. He knew the Jews were hostile, so why did he do it?

Application points.

Am I properly thankful when God meets my needs?

Or do I, by my actions, continue to serve His enemies?

v16 The upshot was that Jesus was then persecuted by the Jewish authorities. According to the Received text, they sought even then to slay Jesus because he did these things on the Sabbath.

v17 *"My Father is still working, and so am I"*. Rather than defer to or appease the Jewish authorities, as the healed man had done, Jesus exposes the basis of their hypocrisy. He argues that the man could not have been healed without a direct act of God. So the Father was working - on their Sabbath. So it was appropriate for Jesus Himself to do likewise. That God had worked the miracle was proof enough that Jesus' work of healing had been right, and this placed it above all censure from human regulations.

Jesus claims the actions of the Father and the Son are of the same order, a most provocative statement that is expanded upon later in the chapter.

v18 The claim of equality with God was a still more serious offence in Jewish eyes than breaking the Sabbath.

Jesus' motive was His love for His neighbour. Elsewhere, when he healed a man with a withered hand (Matthew 12:10-13), Jesus pointed to the fact that everyone would save his animal from a pit on the Sabbath. These acts of compassion show that all men recognise implicitly that the law was never intended to be obeyed prescriptively. The story of the Good Samaritan makes the same point. Love is far more important than religious observance. Religious observances continually changed throughout Biblical history, as people better understood what godliness is.

In Jesus we have the epitome of godliness. The early church however remained, and indeed the church today continues to remain, wedded to many concepts that Jesus overturned.

Traditional ideas must give way before what God Himself was doing. This was not easy for the Early Church to come to terms with. Perhaps the most obvious example is the way Peter had to be persuaded to go to the house Cornelius by the vision of the unclean animals (Acts 10:9-17). Then when he preached there, Peter was really rather ungracious and reluctant to give the whole message (Acts 10:34-43). God baptised those men in the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-46), and Peter again had to give way to what God was doing (Acts 10:47-48). Later Peter excused himself and defended his actions by saying, *"Who was I to resist God?"* (Acts 11:17). Much of Paul's teaching emphasises the uselessness of rules and special days, and traditional notions of difference. We should not imagine that these hangovers were all eliminated by the close of the New Testament. Much later, attitudes to slavery changed when men's understanding of love for neighbours expanded. And this process, which Jesus began, still remains incomplete.

Application points

What principles do I apply in deciding how to act, and what to approve, is it according to love or to law?

Am I resisting God, by sticking to outmoded, supposedly Christian, traditions?

Will I allow myself to embrace change when I see that God is clearly acting outside what I think is right, against my perception of what God has apparently commanded in the past?

Am I prepared to stand out like Jesus for what is right, but unpopular, when God says so?

This is what it means to "live by faith". The Son did what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19). So must we. It is doing what God wants me to do now, out of love for God and neighbour.

No wonder Jesus was unpopular: He was too radical. His precepts are still too radical now.

Application point

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Nothing else matters.

This paper supports ministry to Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship, Camberley on 7 December 2003.

(The elders of Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship do not necessarily endorse the opinions expressed in this paper, which are entirely the responsibility of the author)

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(7.12.2003, 5.9.2018)

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